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Dissuasion and the NPT Regime: Complementary or Contradictory Strategies?

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Introduction

From an American perspective, the central purpose of the "dissuasion strategy" spelled out in *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (September 2002) and the key objective of the nuclear Non-Proliferation regime are identical: to reduce the likelihood that non-nuclear weapons states, especially those with a history of hostility toward the United States and our allies, will acquire nuclear weapons. They are presented in *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America* as complementary tools in "our comprehensive strategy to combat WMD."^[1] The means by which dissuasion strategy and the NPT regime are meant to influence the calculations and incentives of non-nuclear states, however, are quite different. Indeed, a review of the underlying logics and the methods by which these two tools are meant to work reveals severe tensions between the NPT regime and dissuasion strategy.

This *Strategic Insight* highlights those contradictions in an effort to spark deeper thought about potential trade-offs between these two approaches, as well as ways in which tensions between them can be mitigated. Reasonable people can (and do) disagree about the current and potential effectiveness of dissuasion strategies and the NPT regime. But reasonable disagreements can best be resolved, or at least a more effective balance struck, if we clearly identify the underlying assumptions and tensions between these strategies designed to meet the same goals.

The Logic of the NPT

How do the NPT and the regime that surrounds it reduce the incentives and constrain the capabilities of non-nuclear states to build nuclear weapons? The NPT, I would argue, is built upon three related bargains. Unfortunately, each of these has been severely challenged, if not undercut, during the past decade:

- The first bargain (and the most important one, in my view) is between the non-nuclear weapons states themselves. Many non-nuclear states would have a strong national

security incentive to develop nuclear weapons if they feared that their neighbors were about to get them. The first bargain under the NPT is thus a solution to a collective action problem with the non-nuclear states telling each other, in effect, that "I won't get nuclear weapons provided that you do not either"—and the International Atomic Energy Agency inspection system was designed to provide mutual assurances that each non-nuclear state was keeping its promises in that regard. Each time a new nuclear proliferant emerges in the international system, however, non-nuclear states in the region must reevaluate the attractiveness of this bargain: the Israeli nuclear weapons program, the development and testing of nuclear weapons by India and Pakistan in 1998, and most recently, the apparent development of nuclear weapons by the DPRK have, not surprisingly, led other states in their region to begin to reevaluate their nonproliferation policies.

- The second bargain is enshrined in Article VI of the treaty—the promise that in exchange for nuclear restraint by the have-nots, the nuclear weapons states will "work in good faith" toward the eventual elimination of their own nuclear arsenals. In 1995, when negotiating for a permanent extension of the treaty, the United States government made a commitment that it would sign and ratify the CTBT as a signal of its Article VI commitment.^[2] In addition, as part of this bargain, the U.S. and other nuclear states declared that they would not threaten or use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear weapons states who are members in good standing of the NPT.^[3] This bargain has also been called into question: first, by the failure to the Senate to ratify the CTBT and then the decision of the Bush Administration to reject the treaty outright; and second, by the push within the Bush Administration to use nuclear weapons threats to deter chemical and biological threats. As noted below, the renewed emphasis on dissuasion in the *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America* and other Bush Administration strategy documents have been cited as a third piece of evidence that the U.S. government, despite rhetoric to the contrary, has in fact abandoned its commitment to Article VI and related promises to the non-nuclear weapons states.
- The third bargain is the promise under Article IV that the nuclear weapons states will permit non-nuclear weapons states to acquire and utilize nuclear technology for peaceful energy purposes. The compelling evidence that North Korea used NPT sanctioned nuclear facilities to develop nuclear weapons has highlighted the dangerous loophole in the NPT whereby states could cheat and then withdraw from the treaty, or withdraw from the treaty legally and use the materials and know-how to build a nuclear weapon. The Article IV bargain has thus unraveled as well, and both President Bush and IAEA director Mohammed El Baradei have presented proposals to eliminate the loophole by restricting access to full fuel cycle technology and revising or eliminating the NPT 90-day withdrawal clause.

In short, the NPT regime reduces the incentives of non-nuclear states to get nuclear weapons by embedding their decisions in a web of bargains. Obviously, not all signatories to the treaty have been successfully constrained: witness North Korea, Iraq (before the 1991 Gulf War), and Iran today. But others have been significantly constrained, and if current challenges to the NPT regime are not dealt with effectively in the near future, a significant number of non-nuclear states that have the capability to develop nuclear weapons in a relatively short period of time (approximately two-three years) will be forced to reconsider the costs and benefits of remaining in the treaty. [\[See Table 1.\]](#)

The Logic of Dissuasion Strategies

The logic of the dissuasion strategy is different from that of the NPT. As outlined in various Bush

Administration strategy documents, the logic of dissuasion is that foreign governments will be constrained from developing advanced weapons capabilities by their belief that U.S. offensive and defensive military capabilities are so strong that their quest for such capabilities would at best be too expensive at best, and at worst be futile.

Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld elevated dissuasion to a U.S. defense policy on par with deterrence and defense in the September 2001 Quadrennial Review, calling for "a portfolio of U.S. military capabilities, capabilities that could not only help us prevail against current threats, but because we possess them, hopefully dissuade potential adversaries from developing dangerous new capabilities themselves."^[4] In September 2002, the White House linked dissuasion to effective defense and consequence management in *The National Security Strategy of the United States*: "Minimizing the effects of WMD use against our people will help deter those who possess such weapons and dissuade those who seek to acquire them by persuading enemies that they cannot attain their desired ends."^[5] That policy document also explained how U.S. military superiority would be pursued, for under the logic of dissuasion "[o]ur forces will be strong enough to dissuade potential adversaries from pursuing a military build-up in hopes of surpassing, or equaling, the power of the United States."^[6] Finally, the December 2002 document, *National Strategy to Combat Weapons of Mass Destruction* appeared to expand the declaratory policy of "calculated ambiguity", which had previously used ambiguous nuclear threats to *deter* chemical or biological weapons use, as part of the dissuasion strategy to reduce the risks of WMD acquisition: "A *strong declaratory policy* and effective military forces are essential elements of our contemporary deterrent posture, along with the full range of political tools to persuade potential adversaries *not to seek* or use WMD. The United States will continue to make clear that it reserves the right to respond with overwhelming force—including through resort to all of our options—to the use of WMD against the United States, our forces abroad, and our friends and allies."^[7]

Conflicts and Conundrums

There are serious conflicts between these two strategies with regard to nuclear non-proliferation. First, dissuasion strategy implies that the United States must maintain a significant degree of superiority in numbers of nuclear forces over other states to reduce their ability and hence incentives to catch up to the United States (relevant to all other nuclear states, except possibly for Russia), or to reduce the capability and incentives of non-nuclear states to acquire weapons. This policy implication of dissuasion strategy, however logical, clearly conflicts with the Article VI commitment to work in good faith toward the eventual elimination of nuclear weapons.

While a number of current and former government officials have claimed that global perceptions that the U.S. is keeping that commitment are not an important factor in foreign governments' decisions to develop or not develop nuclear weapons,^[8] the cases they cite are always the most difficult ones: states that have little domestic debate and seem determined to get weapons of mass destruction, such as North Korea and Iraq. In a wider set of non-nuclear weapons "fence sitter" states, especially those in which domestic political actors may hold contrasting positions about getting nuclear weapons, the belief that that the U.S. government has abandoned Article VI commitments had increased.^[9] It is impossible to predict precisely how such beliefs will influence future debates by such potential proliferators as Japan, South Korea, Saudi Arabia, or Egypt. But it is easy to predict that perceptions that the U.S. is not keeping up its side of the NPT bargain will make it easier for hawks in those countries to argue for abandoning their governments NPT commitments. Even the Iranian government's decisions about nuclear weapons procurement is likely to be increasingly influenced by domestic political debates in the coming years, and perceptions of U.S. compliance with its treaty obligations (while perhaps less crucial than U.S. coercive diplomacy) may have a significant impact on the substance and outcome of such debates.^[10]

Second, the argument that even limited ballistic missile defense (BMD) capabilities will dissuade current countries of concern from developing WMD is highly suspect in my view. Not only are there serious questions about the technical military capabilities of current BMD, especially against a government that utilizes simple countermeasures such as decoys and chaff to spoof defense target acquisition capabilities, but there are other means of delivery available—both covert means and alternative military delivery systems against U.S. forces and allies—to potential and current proliferators such as Iran and North Korea. This argument does not necessarily imply the U.S. should never deploy BMD to counter such WMD threats. But it does mean we should be skeptical of arguments that suggest defenses will dissuade non-nuclear states that are hostile to us from developing WMD that they believe will level the playing field to a significant degree.

Indeed, it is worth noting here that some of the discussions of dissuasion strategies have a logical contradiction in them: "rogue" states are sometimes described as being so irrational as not to be subject to deterrence, but somehow rational enough to be subject to the more subtle influences of dissuasion. *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, for example, claims that "rogue states" are "more willing to take risks" than were Cold War enemies and are "determined to acquire weapons of mass destruction." Yet these same governments, it is argued, may be subject to dissuasion.^[11]

Third, and finally, there is no evidence I know of that demonstrates that U.S. threats to use nuclear weapons in response to chemical or biological weapons use by enemies has successfully deterred enemy states in crises or conflicts, much less successfully dissuaded hostile governments not to acquire chemical or biological weapons. There are strong reasons to prefer a U.S. strategic doctrine that emphasizes the threat of overwhelming conventional military responses against any state that uses chemical or biological weapons against us or our allies.^[12] If nuclear states, especially the United States, are seen to need nuclear weapons to deter chemical and biological attacks from regional powers, won't other regional actors feel increased incentives to get nuclear weapons themselves? Even more important, in my view, is the danger of a nuclear "commitment trap" in which a U.S. President's deterrent threats to use nuclear weapons fails, and he feels compelled to follow through on that threat following a BW or CW attack for the sake of maintaining his personal credibility and U.S. global credibility.

Conclusion

In planning for future U.S. military forces and capabilities, "dissuasion" has always been one of the background goals. Placing it at the forefront in recent planning documents and declaratory policies has the benefit of forcing defense planners and analysts to think more thoroughly about how to persuade other governments not to seek capabilities we hope to avoid facing in the future. The U.S. government should be more careful, however, not to make statements or present strategic arguments, for the sake of dissuasion, that undermine the remaining important—though fragile—strengths of the NPT regime.

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